

A Symposium on the Spirit World

Organizing Instructor: Ken S. McAllister

Guest Lecture/Discussion Leaders: TBD

Course Description:

“Alcohol is the anesthesia by which we endure the operation of life,” quipped George Bernard Shaw. To be sure there is truth in this observation, but it’s hardly the whole story. For millennia, human beings have been fermenting and distilling spirits and putting them to the widest possible range of uses, from topical antiseptics and poison ivy curatives to insect repellents and toothache remedies. Most enduring, however, are booze’s cultural achievements, which often come to be associated with producers and imbibers alike. This Humanities Seminars Program course will introduce students to a range of distilled spirits from around the world, not to celebrate ethanol (the alcohol at the heart of all the world’s spiritous concoctions), but rather to help reweave the spirits of the world into their cultural contexts. Among the topics we will explore are:

- Alcohol as Remedy and Poison
- Liquid Bread: The Marketing and Business of Booze
- The Communion of Drinkers
- Litigating Liquor: A History of Moonshine Mandates
- Ritual Proofs and Sacred Spirits
- Rye Whiskey I Cry: Liquor in Arts and Crafts

Importantly, this five-session course will not be organized around the topics above, but rather by the type of spirit. The topics above will be integrated throughout the course, which will help to keep the course focused on humanities topics rather than on the distillations and fermentations themselves. See the propositive “Weekly Program” below for details.

Weekly Program

Week 1: Introduction to the Spirit World

Week 2: Vodka and Gin

Week 3: Whiskey and Tequila

Week 4: Rum and Schnapps

Week 5: Conclusions

Professor’s Bio

Ken McAllister is a Professor of Public & Applied Humanities and the Associate Dean of Research & Program Innovation in the College of Humanities. A scholar of popular culture, Ken has published on topics ranging from bagpipe music and magic shows to video games and alien languages. He is also an avid collector and taster of uisge beatha and other regional spirits from around the world.